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CHRISTIAN STUDENTS' VIEWS ON TERRORISM AND RELIGION: AN AUSTRALIAN STUDY

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This paper was written in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies, and of Indonesians making incursions into the western region of Aceh. These events were set against the backdrop of the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001 and the loss of life by many Australians and people of other nationalities in the bombings on Bali on October 12, 2002. Later, the trial of Amrozi, one of the Bali bombers, featured daily in the Australian media.

So it was not surprising that many of the students in the relative safety of Ballarat Christian College were feeling disquieted and uncertain about world events. They were not experiencing first hand anything like the pressure on, and spiritual upheaval in, the teenagers at the middle of the conflict zones thousands of kilometres away. Yet, reports in the media were causing my students anguish, apprehension, and even fear that these events might erupt into global conflict, and that they could soon be called to war.

Even if not overtly, the media seemed to imply that religious differences were the motivating factors for much of the conflict. The Prime Minister of Australia called upon Australians "[to] respect and understand the many cultures and religions that make up our society... We value our individual rights and also respect our obligations to other Australians because we know that only by doing so can our security, prosperity and freedom endure" (Howard 2003).

Shellie Levine has claimed that "little to no attention is given to the psychology of spirituality... in the search for peace. Instead emphasis is placed upon institutionalised religious doctrine" (Levine 2003, p. 99). Levine attested, "it is the psychology of children's spirituality that must be attended to in order to sculpt the future of our planet in realizing the possibilities of humanity for peace" (p. 99). While this was written in the context of the war in Iraq, it raises significant concerns also for Australian students.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Ballarat is an Australian regional city of 80,000 people mainly of Anglo-European descent and a high percentage of whom have nominal Roman Catholic or Presbyterian backgrounds. Ballarat Christian College (BCC) is a five year old low-fee, interdenominational non-government day school for students in year levels 7-12 (12-18 year olds). Like other Christian community schools, BCC's enrolment is open to people who will support the Christian values of courtesy, care and compassion on which the school is founded, but church attendance is not a selection criterion. In 2003, the 84 students at BCC represented 17 different Christian denominations. While some of the students were not affiliated with any religious group, the major support came from Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Baptist Churches. BCC, like many similar schools in Australia, bases its curriculum on the state curriculum guidelines, which in Victoria allow for particular classes to be run to reflect the religious/philosophical base of the school. So, for example, two of BCC's 35 weekly lessons for each class are for Christian

Education. Also, each day is started with prayer in class home groups and there is a short weekly chapel service.

As some of the students were expressing concerns about the conflicts named above and the role religion played in them, I wanted to determine the extent to which the vocal expressions of concern for world affairs were shared by the whole school body; how open or biased members of the school community were toward people of other beliefs; what their understandings were of God's attitude to war and terrorism; and whether the staff were perceiving the students accurately as far as religious education was concerned. Permission was gained from the school's Board of Management to survey the students.

THE STUDY

A *Personal Beliefs Survey* (PBS) was constructed to determine how strongly the students held their views with respect to war, terrorism, religious beliefs and their understanding of God's attitude to these things. The survey contained 25 provocative statements, prefaced by "I believe..", each with five alternative responses ranging from Strongly Agree, through Agree and Undecided, to Disagree and Strongly Disagree. These statements were worded strongly in an attempt to evoke a decisive response from each participant rather than have them stick with the safe neutral ground of 'Undecided.' The 25 items comprised six that the author thought had a key focus on war (e.g. "I believe wars are acceptable if politicians make that decision"), six on beliefs (e.g. "I believe difference in religious beliefs is the main reason for terrorism"), five on each of religion (e.g. "I believe all religions are of equal worth/value to Australian society") and God (e.g. "I believe God blesses Christians more than others") and three on terrorists (e.g. "I believe the best way to stop terrorists is to kill them").

The students were given free choice to participate in the survey. The administration of the survey took about ten minutes in a religious education class. The students were instructed not to spend too much time on any one question, but to record the first response they thought of. It was hoped that this instruction would elicit the students' deep-seated beliefs and/or prejudices, rather than allow them time to construct what they might consider to be politically correct responses. While responses were anonymous, the survey requested details of participants' gender, age, school year, how often they went to Church (on a four-point scale from 'never/hardly ever' to 'at least once a week') and how often they read the Bible (on a five-point scale from 'never/hardly ever' to 'every day/most days').

Participants also took another five minutes to complete the *Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire* (SWBQ) (Fisher 1999, Gomez & Fisher 2003). The SWBQ has 20 items, with five items representing each of four domains of spiritual well-being: Personal domain (how one intra-relates with oneself with regard to meaning, purpose and values in life), Communal domain (expressed in the quality and depth of inter-personal relationships), Environmental domain (beyond care, nurture and stewardship to relation with environment) and Transcendental domain (Relationship with God).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarises the range of students who completed the questionnaires. As 90% of the students participated, it is reasonable to suggest that the results reflect well the views of the student body in BCC.

Table 1: Details of BCC students in the study.

	Year level						Average age
	7	8	9	10	11/12	Total	
Male	8	9	3	8	14	42	14.8yrs
Female	11	7	4	3	9	34	14.6yrs
Total	19	16	7	11	23	76	

Church attendance, relationship with God and Bible reading

There were no significant gender differences for frequency of church attendance ($t(df=74) = -.581$, ns) and how students related with God, as measured by the Transcendental domain of the SWBQ ($t(df=74) = -.589$, ns). The female students reported reading the Bible slightly more than the males ($t(df=74) = -2.36$, $p < .05$), a result which may not be surprising as Australian teenage males are generally less literate than their female peers.

The frequency of church attendance was consistent across the year levels, with about two-thirds in each year level attending weekly ($F(4,71) = 1.62$, ns). This rate is considerably higher than that for Catholic students in Australian secondary schools, as reported by Engebretson (2002) (40% attended weekly to monthly), McQuillan (2002) (35% attended monthly to at least once a week), and Fisher (2004) (28% of Catholic students, 50% of other non-government students, and 76% of Christian school students attended church at least once a month).

Eleven of the 19 BCC students who reported reading the Bible 'several times a week' or 'daily' were in years 11 and 12. That is, half of the senior students reported reading the Bible regularly, whereas only eight of the junior and middle secondary students claimed to read it at least once a week.

Table 2 shows the significant correlations between students' frequency of church attendance, relationship with God and Bible reading, indicating congruence between their internal and external religious behaviour.

Table 2: Correlations between church attendance, Bible reading and relating to God.

	Read Bible	Relate to God
Church attendance	.489***	.538***
Read Bible		.477***

*** $p < .001$

The mean value of the students' score on relating to God was 3.77. There was no apparent difference between this school and a number of similar Christian community schools in Victoria, Australia (mean = 3.91), but it was markedly higher than for students in secondary Catholic (mean = 2.66) and other religious non-government schools (mean = 2.30) (see Fisher 2004).

Personal Beliefs Survey

The 25 items in the PBS were each scored from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). There were no significant gender differences for the items in the survey. As a convenient means of investigating if there were key relationships between the items, an exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis with oblimin rotation was conducted with the students' input on the 25 items on the survey. This resulted in a nine-factor solution, with eigen values greater than one. Together, these nine factors accounted for 70.3% of the variance. Item loadings are shown in Table 3, which identifies the items relating to each factor

with item-total factor loading above 0.40, indicating unidimensionality of each item within the stated factor (de Vaus 1991, p. 255).

Table 3: Primary factor loadings on the *Personal Beliefs Survey*.

Item "I believe..."	Mean	Factors								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. war should never happen	3.22	-.02	.24	.02	.07	.12	.02	<u>.76</u>	-.19	-.03
2. people who come to live in Australia from overseas should come from a Christian culture	1.93	.28	-.20	.09	.08	.08	<u>-.75</u>	-.19	.33	.06
3. the war on terrorism will never end	3.22	.19	.32	.17	<u>-.68</u>	.07	.14	.04	-.32	-.06
4. people have a right to freely practice their religious beliefs, whether Christian or not	3.93	<u>-.66</u>	.20	-.14	.09	-.02	.38	.05	-.23	.15
5. wars are acceptable if politicians make that decision	2.25	.20	<u>-.56</u>	.27	-.04	.06	<u>.46</u>	-.22	.09	-.01
6. there should not be tension between different religious groups in Australia	3.58	<u>-.65</u>	.10	.31	.21	-.03	.02	.33	.01	.18
7. the best way to stop terrorists is to kill them	2.54	-.06	-.26	-.05	-.11	<u>.82</u>	-.06	-.06	-.02	-.15
8. all religions are of equal worth/value to Australian society	3.29	<u>-.77</u>	-.11	-.23	.04	.13	-.10	.03	-.19	.25
9. all people should try to live at peace with others, no matter what their beliefs or religion	4.32	-.37	.15	.11	.18	-.15	.29	<u>.71</u>	-.13	.31
10. wars will continue to happen because of people's different beliefs	3.92	.01	-.13	<u>.81</u>	-.02	-.07	-.03	.01	-.13	.00
11. God blesses Christians more than others	2.70	<u>.41</u>	.09	.08	.10	-.24	-.16	-.19	<u>.60</u>	.26
12. difference in religious beliefs is the main reason for terrorism	3.38	.25	.25	<u>.59</u>	-.24	-.02	<u>-.56</u>	.13	.00	.13
13. all people are of equal value to God, no matter what their beliefs	4.03	-.24	.08	-.10	.16	.10	-.02	.11	-.06	<u>.85</u>
14. it is OK to disagree publicly with other people's religious views and practices	3.09	.32	.16	.20	-.30	.15	.10	<u>-.43</u>	.32	.32
15. God favours Christians over other people	2.07	.27	-.16	.03	-.19	.03	-.16	-.34	<u>.74</u>	-.25
16. all people found guilty of terrorism should at least be jailed for life	3.79	.08	-.00	.33	-.10	<u>.72</u>	-.14	.06	-.14	.37
17. wars are necessary to settle differences between people with different beliefs	2.41	.10	<u>-.77</u>	.07	.00	.03	.05	-.21	-.10	-.11
18. only Christian organisations should be	2.26	<u>.81</u>	-.18	.05	-.10	-.04	-.22	-.06	.17	.05

supported by the Australian government, not other religious groups

19. God loves all people no matter what religion they are (or are not)	4.25	.05	.36	.10	<u>.77</u>	-.07	.05	.01	-.22	.17
20. terrorists have too much influence on what is happening in the world	3.62	.10	.14	.27	-.32	-.00	-.10	<u>.69</u>	-.11	.01
21. it is easy to live peacefully with people of different beliefs and values to our own	3.00	-.25	.21	-.09	.21	<u>.53</u>	.33	.08	.30	.35
22. wars remove the threat of terror within and between nations	2.36	.12	<u>-.81</u>	-.06	-.10	.25	-.11	-.07	.20	-.19
23. conflict is necessary to bring peace to this world	2.54	.06	<u>-.74</u>	.04	-.08	.11	<u>-.41</u>	-.31	.06	.13
24. terrorists are motivated by religious differences with their targets/enemies	3.67	.05	.00	<u>.72</u>	-.06	.24	-.00	.15	.15	.00
25. God is in favour of overcoming terrorists through war	2.74	.13	-.29	.23	.14	.29	<u>-.42</u>	-.34	-.04	.33
Eigen values		4.1	2.7	2.39	1.93	1.59	1.42	1.29	1.09	1.03
% of variance		16.4	10.9	9.6	7.7	6.4	5.7	5.2	4.4	4.2

Loadings of 0.40 or more are highlighted.

Although the purpose of this research was not to validate the PBS as a research instrument, it is interesting to note that 15 of the 25 items coalesced in five of the factors predicted by the author in the establishment of this survey. As it stands, this exploratory factor analysis is not definitive. To establish the PBS as a research instrument, more students would need to be surveyed and factors then deleted if they contained less than at least three items. More than three items would be preferable. A summary of the results from the research follows.

- Factor 1: Equality of religion.

Four of the five items which form this factor (4, 6, 8, 18) were included in the 'religion factor' prediction list used to set up this survey. The majority of students supported the idea that all religions are of equal worth to the Australian community and should be practiced freely.

- Factor 2: War.

Four of the items in this factor (5, 17, 22, 23) were in the prediction list for 'war' in the development of this survey. These students did not believe that wars are desirable or that they are an effective means to peace.

- Factor 3: Beliefs.

These three items (10, 12, 24) were predicted to be related in a 'beliefs' factor. Overall, differences in religious beliefs were seen to foster terrorism and lead to war.

- Factor 4: Love and war.

There was very strong agreement that 'God loves all people no matter what religion they are (or are not)' (mean = 4.25), but this love was not strong enough to overcome the students' belief that 'the war on terrorism will never end' (mean = 3.22).

- Factor 5: Terrorists.

Items 7 and 16 were predicted to be related in a ‘terrorists’ factor. The students were relatively undecided as to whether ‘it is easy to live peacefully with people of different beliefs and values to our own’ (mean = 3.00). They did not support the proposition that ‘the best way to stop terrorists is to kill them’ (mean = 2.54) but they did agree that ‘all people found guilty of terrorism should at least be jailed for life’ (mean = 3.79). It could be suggested that these ideas set up an each-way bet on the students’ part, by desiring to live peaceably with people of different beliefs but being prepared to lock them away from their community if they become terrorists (although sparing their lives in the process).

- Factor 6: Conflict.

The students’ very limited support for the belief that ‘people who come to live in Australia from overseas should come from a Christian culture’ (mean = 1.93), was a magnanimous gesture considering their assertion that ‘difference in religious beliefs is the main reason for terrorism’. These students appear prepared to accept anyone to Australia, even though differences in religious beliefs can lead to terrorism, which they would not want to overcome through war, because conflict does not bring peace and God is not in favour of it anyway.

- Factor 7: Peace.

The students strongly expressed the desire that ‘all people should try to live at peace with others, no matter what their beliefs or religion’ (mean = 4.32) and that ‘war should never happen’ (mean = 3.22). They held the view that ‘terrorists have too much influence on what is happening in the world’ (mean = 3.62) and there was slight agreement that ‘it is OK to disagree publicly with other people’s religious views and practices’ (mean = 3.09), which is somewhat surprising considering that peace was of major concern to these students.

- Factor 8: God’s blessing and favour.

These two items (11 and 15) were predicted to be related in a ‘God’ factor when the survey was being formed. There was a widely held belief among the students that negated the proposition ‘God favours Christians over other people’ (mean = 2.07), but they were slightly less against the notion that ‘God blesses Christians more than others’ (mean = 2.70), especially amongst those who attended Church frequently.

- Factor 9: People’s value to God.

There was a strong belief among the students that ‘all people are of equal value to God, no matter what their beliefs’ (mean = 4.03). This view was consistently held across the student body irrespective of their frequency of Church attendance and their relationship with God.

Peace (Factor 7) and Personal, Communal & Environmental Well-being

Table 4 shows the correlation between the peace items and the students’ quality of relationship with self, others and the environment.

Table 4: Correlation of Peace items with Personal, Communal and Environmental Well-being.

Peace items	Personal wellbeing	Communal wellbeing	Environmental wellbeing
9. live at peace	.252*	.285*	.254*
14. OK to disagree	-.259*	-.234*	-.133 ^{ns}
20. terrorists’ influence	.230*	.304**	.205 ^{ns}

In keeping with the students’ strong desire to live at peace (mean = 4.21), it was not surprising to find that this item correlated positively with their wellbeing. The positive

correlations between Personal and Communal well-being and ‘Terrorists having too much influence’, and negative correlations with ‘it’s OK publicly to disagree with other people’s religious view’ reflect some of the anxiety expressed by the students in daily life as well as re-emphasising their desire for peace.

Regression analysis of the Personal Beliefs Survey by Relationship with God, Church attendance and Bible reading

Stepwise regression analyses were performed with each of the 25 items as a dependent variable. The students’ personal relationship with God, frequency of church attendance and the extent to which they read the Bible were used as independent variables. Only ten of the 25 items showed significant relationships with one or more of these independent variables (see Table 5).

Table 5: Summary of regression analysis of PBS items by *Relationship with God, Church attendance and Bible reading* (β values shown).

PBS item	<i>Relationship with God</i>	<i>Church attendance</i>	<i>Bible reading</i>
1. War never	.35**	-.08	-.46***
4. Religious freedom	-.34**	-.16	-.01
7. Kill terrorists	-.07	-.42***	.07
8. All religions equal	-.34**	-.13	.06
11. God blesses Christians	.02	.38**	-.03
12. Beliefs → terrorism	.31**	.12	-.16
18. Christian Australia	.46***	.21	.07
19. God loves all	.11	.44***	.14
20. Terrorists’ influence	.38**	-.16	-.20
22. Wars remove threat	.06	-.27*	.07

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The four items affected by *church attendance* show the distinct influence of the church on the students’ beliefs: The students who do not attend church are more inclined to agree that wars remove the threat of terror and they are more supportive of killing terrorists. Even though the students who regularly attend church are more inclined to believe that ‘God blesses Christians more than others’ they also hold more strongly than non-participants the view that ‘God loves all people no matter what religion they are (or are not).’

The students who *read the Bible* more frequently are more inclined to disagree that ‘war should never happen.’ While this is in keeping with the ‘wars and rumours of wars’ mentioned in the Bible (Matthew 24:6, Mark 13:7, Luke 21:9), it flies in the face of the students’ overwhelming desire for peace.

The students’ *relationship with God* is influenced by many people: from home, church, school, and friends. Table 5 shows six of the students’ beliefs that are influenced more by factors outside the church than within. Hopefully the religious education program in the school is having a significant impact on the students’ beliefs but further research will need to determine the extent of this influence. The students who have a less-developed relationship with God are more likely to believe that ‘war should never happen.’ This is an understandable sentiment from a peace-seeking human viewpoint, but fifteen students who have a strong relationship with God disagreed with this statement. The question facing a school like BCC is where biblical Christian education should fit on this matter.

Seven students with a stated deeper relationship with God also disagreed that ‘people have a right to freely practice their religious beliefs, whether Christian or not.’ These students would need to be interviewed to determine whether this is based on their objection to other religions being freely practiced in Australia. Twelve highly religious students disagreed that ‘all religions are of equal worth/value to Australian society.’ Sixteen of those close to God believed that ‘only Christian organisations should be supported by the Australian government, not other religious groups.’ Although it appears that 10-20% of these students were expressing cloistered views toward religious freedom, only four students took the minority stance on all three issues.

Twenty-five students with stronger relationships with God expressed concern that ‘difference in religious beliefs is the main reason for terrorism’ and 28 students concurred that ‘terrorists have too much influence on what is happening in the world.’ It would be valuable to follow up this survey with a question like, “how does your faith allow you to see God’s hand at work with regards to terrorism and its influence today?”

CONCLUSIONS

There was general agreement among the BCC students that all people should try to live at peace with others, and that God loves all people who are of equal value to God, irrespective of their beliefs or religion. These students do not see Australia as the exclusive domain of Christians, nor do they think that God’s blessing and favour is bestowed only on Christians. Most of the students see all religions as of equal worth to the Australian community and believe they should be practiced freely, even though differences in religious beliefs are seen to foster terrorism and lead to war. The students desire to live peaceably with people of different beliefs, but are prepared to jail them if they become terrorists, not kill them. Although the students believe God loves all people, they do not think this love will be sufficient to end the war on terrorism. In summary, the students do not see war as desirable, nor an effective means to peace; and they do not think God is in favour of war.

Regression analysis revealed that the church has significant influence on the students’ views. Those who attend church frequently are less likely to want to kill terrorists and believe that war removes the threat of terrorism. Although church-attenders believed more strongly that God blesses Christians more than others, they also held stronger beliefs that God loves all people no matter what their religion. Other domains, including home and school, impact on the students’ relationship with God. A very small minority of students who expressed a strong relationship with God, was not so inclined to believe that war should never happen. These students also took a more restrictive view on religious practice in Australia, giving preference to Christianity over other religions. About one third of the students were concerned that differences in religious beliefs lead to terrorism and that terrorists have too much influence on what is happening in the world.

By expressing views which display courtesy, care and compassion towards others, including those with differing viewpoints from their own, the vast majority of the BCC students showed support, in principle, for the Christian ethos espoused in their school. Their views were balanced, egalitarian and inclusive. These outcomes of this survey are encouraging for me, as I have had the privilege of fostering discussions about religious issues with the BCC students. Now, the challenge is to continue to encourage the students to work out these ideals in practice, and to become peace-makers – locally, nationally and internationally.

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NOTES

1. Full details of the study results are available from the author.
2. Anyone interested in extending this survey with a comparative study is welcome to contact the author.

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